Suburban man gets inside look at McGovern

By Jules Witcover
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ALBUQUERQUE — The name on the official press badge is Richard Johnson. The badge is like all the rest, but its wearer — a short, stocky gentleman of 43 with a Kiwanis look about him — is not quite the same as the other wise-cracking, casual men behind the other press badges on the McGovern campaign plane.

Despite all the tight security on Sen. George McGovern's plane, Richard Johnson is able to walk to the forward cabin and sit down for a midflight chat with the Democratic presidential nominee.

A week ago, Johnson was a private citizen going about his business as credit manager for the National Steel Service Center in Evanston, Ill.

Now, while the others wearing press badges were busily hitting typewriters, tinkering with TV cameras, playing cards or engaging in the incessant banter that chases boredom in political campaigns, Richard Johnson watched with a mixture of awe and amusement, his politeness and courtesy setting him apart.

'Mr. Average'

He is the featured performer in a Public Broadcasting Service (educational TV) special scheduled for Sept. 20 that will show how a high-powered presidential campaign looks to a Mr. Average American when privileged to see it from the inside.

For the last week, in the company of PBS commentator Robert MacNeil and producer Robert Lissit, Johnson has been flying from one end of the United States to the other —

RICHARD JOHNSON

and in between, trying to make up his mind how to vote in November.

A lifelong Democrat, Johnson admitted readily that he was thinking seriously of voting for the first time for a Republican — President Nixon.

His wife, Mary Jane, is a Republican, Johnson said, and "Every year since we've been married (18 years) our votes have canceled each other." But he has some reservations about where McGovern stands on key issues, especially amnesty for draft dodgers and McGovern's economic positions.

Speaks to McGovern

Johnson had an opportunity to ask the candidate directly about his concerns in an interview Saturday in Albuquerque. He said he now was "uncommitted" but intended to use the next two months to make up his mind.

He acknowledged the close-up exposure had had an impact on his thinking. But Johnson was not succumbing to the lure of familiarity. He said of McGovern: "He's a very congenial man, very dedicated in his purpose, with a religious background I like to see in anyone."

But Johnson said he thought McGovern would have to be more "dynamic" if he hoped to win. "The thing that really bothers me about him is that I think he's losing votes because he's not as dynamic as he should be," Johnson said.

Of Mr. Nixon, he said: "He inherited a number of problems he's been wrestling with. I think he's done a commendable job in the four years he's been in there."

PBS gets idea

The series of events that put Richard Johnson on the McGovern campaign plane began last December. Lissit and MacNeil, as part of the PBS yearlong effort to look at the 1972 campaign more from the viewpoint of the voter, struck on the idea of finding Mr. Average American and taking a good look at him and his concerns.

PBS researchers located an 'ideal' middle-class community — Rolling Meadows, Ill., 21 miles northwest of downtown Chicago — and selected about a dozen families. Lissit and MacNeil interviewed the families at length, narrowed the field to two and then to one.

The Johnson family — Richard, Mary Jane and their three daughters and a son — became the subject of a half-hour PBS show last Feb. 9 called "Man in the Middle." They were filmed watching Sen. Edmund S. Muskie (D-Me.) making his TV announcement of candidacy.

Thumbnail sketch

The conversations revealed Johnson to be a hard-working, modest, God-loving, family man whose main ambition was to put his children through college and live in peace with his neighbors and himself.

In the February show, he expressed about the same sentiments on voting for President Nixon he does today, and now admits he never expected McGovern to be in the picture this fall.

"The man I would have voted for as a Democrat didn't choose to run," Johnson said, referring to Sen. Edward M. Kennedy (D-Mass.).

The trip, Johnson said, has given him a much better understanding of a presidential campaign. He admitted he had some biases about the press before this experience but said he appreciated the role of the press more now.

Impressed by activity

"The thing that really impresses me about the press is the beehive of activity — running to the phones, the typewriters always going, the great footage of film that is never used — that is the kind of thing that the average Joe doesn't understand.

Richard Johnson — himself an average Joe — said he comes away from the experience more interested, more respectful and more sympathetic. But he has learned also that the press is very selective in what it shows and write about.

From now until Nov. 7, he said, he will be paying much more attention to the presidential campaign — and to George McGovern — than he would have otherwise.

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